



“...when all is said and done, our own existence is an experiment of nature, an attempt at a new synthesis.”

## [Carl Jung, Structure & Dynamics of the Psyche](#)

While Carl Jung is best known for his ideas on the unconscious, be it his theory of the archetypes or his writings on the shadow side of man, Jung was first and foremost a practicing psychologist. Throughout his voluminous writings one can find many practical tips on how to live a better life and in this video we are going to explore this side of Jung's work, focusing our attention on his favored method of self-development, which he called the process of individuation.

To individuate is to self-realize with the aim of moving toward psychological wholeness. Wholeness is an ideal state wherein all our latent potentials are actualized and all the elements of our unconscious brought to the light of consciousness and integrated harmoniously into our character structure. In the brevity of a human life, we can only ever approach, but never fully reach the condition of psychological wholeness. But moving in this direction generates fulfillment and leads to the cultivation of a character that is rooted in our individuality and which transcends mere social roles and the expectations of our peer group and society at large, or as Jung explains:

“Individuation means becoming an “in-dividual,” and, in so far as “individuality” embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as “coming to selfhood” . . .”

## [Carl Jung, Two Essays in Analytical Psychology](#)

Individuation as a method of self-development offers many benefits over following the well-worn paths of conformity. Firstly, this process makes us more capable in life. For as we aim toward psychological wholeness we increase the number of skills and character traits at our disposal and so

augment our capacity to take advantage of life's opportunities and to deal with its problems. Individuation is also an effective antidote to diseases of despair, be it anxiety disorders, neuroses, depressions or certain forms of addiction. For while these conditions can stem from a myriad of causes one of the most common is an unlived life, or the feeling that we are stagnating, in conjunction with a nagging awareness of our ever approaching death. Individuation forces us out of these ruts of being and places us on a life path that is both purposeful and meaningful. A further benefit of individuation is that a by-product of approaching the state of psychological wholeness is the spontaneous formation of an attitude that affirms life and which, in the words of Jung, "*is beyond the reach of emotional entanglements and violent shocks – a consciousness detached from the world.*" ([Carl Jung, Alchemical Studies](#))

Or as Jung writes elsewhere:

"If you sum up what people tell you about their experiences [on the path of individuation], you can formulate it this way: They came to themselves, they could accept themselves, they were able to become reconciled to themselves, and thus were reconciled to adverse circumstances and events."

[Carl Jung, Psychology and Religion](#)

To attain the benefits of individuation requires that we take a step that is simple in theory, but difficult in practice. We must focus our attention selfward and in the most objective manner possible assess our life and the current state of our character.

"[W]isdom begins only when one takes things as they are. . . So it is a healing attitude when one can agree with the facts as they are. . . only then can we thrive."

[Carl Jung, Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934, Vol. I](#)

A radical self-acceptance is needed to individuate. This entails identifying, and accepting our character flaws and weaknesses, but also our talents and strengths. It requires an acceptance of past mistakes and failures and a clear grasp of the current conditions of our life in the recognition that "[we] cannot go forward except from the place where [we] happens to be". ([Carl Jung, Civilization in Transition](#)) And perhaps most importantly we need to accept that there exists a vast potential within us and that the possibilities for our development are endless, or as Jung writes:

"Since [the] growth of personality comes out of the unconscious, which is by definition unlimited, the extent of the personality now gradually realizing itself cannot in practice be limited either. . ."

[Carl Jung, Psychology and Religion](#)

But while self-acceptance is a preparatory step on the path of individuation, it is also a step that in and of itself produces strong therapeutic benefits. In Volume 13 of his collected works Jung quotes a letter from one of his patients about the inner change that occurs when one comes to accept him or herself:

"Out of evil, much good has come to me. By keeping quiet, repressing nothing, remaining attentive, and by accepting reality – taking things as they are, and not as I wanted them to be – by doing all this, unusual knowledge has come to me, and unusual powers as well, such as I could never have imagined before. I always thought that when

we accepted things they overpowered us in some way or other. This turns out not to be true at all, and it is only by accepting them that one can assume an attitude towards them.”

### *Carl Jung, Alchemical Studies*

In addition to *self*-acceptance, Jung also advocates an increased acceptance of those close to us, particularly of our family members. Jung maintained that far too many people, waste far too much time, in the tangles of what he called the “boring family drama”. Unless we have suffered a traumatic experience that we have yet to come to terms with, it is better to accept any past mistreatment as a given condition of our life. Playing the victim, dwelling in pity or blame, trying to change another or trying to account for why we were mistreated is wasted life, or as Jung writes:

“But no matter how much the parents and grandparents may have sinned against the child, the man who is really adult will accept these sins as his own condition which has to be reckoned with. Only a fool is interested in other people’s guilt, since he cannot alter it. The wise man learns only from his own guilt.”

### *Carl Jung, Psychology and Alchemy*

Practicing a radical self-acceptance in conjunction with an increased acceptance of others, places us on the firm ground of reality from which to take the next step on the path of individuation and this is to adopt a goal or life mission.

“I have observed that a life directed to an aim is in general better, richer, and healthier than an aimless one, and that it is better to go forwards with the stream of time than backwards against it.”

### *Carl Jung, Structure & Dynamics of the Psyche*

Adopting a goal or life mission is integral to individuation as psychological wholeness is not approached through mere passive meditation. Rather a constant embrace of challenges leads to the actualization of our potential and novel experiences bring unconscious contents to the light of consciousness and it is a life mission generates this full participation in life. What is more, a goal or mission, can help pull us from the passivity of a disease of despair by diverting our focus and energy from pathological interests, to more constructive and reality-based pursuits:

“Practical experience teaches us as a general rule that a psychic activity can find a substitute only on the basis of equivalence. A pathological interest, for example, an intense attachment to a symptom, can be replaced only by an equally intense attachment to another interest. . .”

### *Carl Jung, Structure & Dynamics of the Psyche*

So as not to be delayed at the step of choosing a goal or life mission, we should realize, that there is no single “right” choice. Psychological wholeness can be approached from many angles so we just need to find something that is intrinsically rewarding enough to keep us motivated and challenging enough to create the novel experiences necessary for self-realization. But like all major life

decisions, in choosing a mission, we must be the one to decide, we should not rely on others to choose for us, or as Jung writes:

“Why are you looking around for help? Do you believe that help will come from outside? What is to come is created in you and from you. Hence look into yourself. Do not compare, do not measure. No other way is like yours. All other ways deceive and tempt you. You must fulfil the way that is in you.”

[Carl Jung, The Red Book](#)

With a mission in hand, we merely need to work towards its achievement, in a consistent and disciplined manner, in order to individuate, or as Jung writes:

“How are you fulfilling your life’s task ([your] “mission”), your *raison d’être*, the meaning and purpose of your existence? This is the question of individuation, the most fateful of all questions. . .”

[Carl Jung, Civilization in Transition](#)

To avoid being thrown off course we should be aware that as we walk the path of individuation we will encounter setbacks and failures and make mistakes and errors. But these experiences should not discourage us for as Jung wrote:

“We must make mistakes. We must live out our own vision of life. . .If you avoid error you do not live; in a sense even it may be said that every life is a mistake, for no one has found the truth.”

[Carl Jung, C. G. Jung Speaking](#)

It is also useful to keep in mind that individuation does not free us from the conditions of human existence – we will still be haunted by our approaching mortality, while illness, injury and cruel twists of fate will still befall us. Like all paths in life, on the path of individuation, suffering is inevitable. When suffering comes our way, Jung was of the strong opinion that we shouldn’t flee from these situations, or deny or repress the feelings that accompany them, but instead we should experience our suffering to the fullest as only then can we move beyond it:

“Real liberation comes not from glossing over or repressing painful states of feeling, but only from experiencing them to the full.”

[Carl Jung, Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious](#)

But even though the path of individuation is challenging and even though it does not free us from suffering, it is a path that generates fulfillment and such cannot always be said of the paths of modern day conformity. If, therefore, we are stuck in a life of boredom, mediocrity, anxiety, depression or addiction Jung’s method of self-development offers a way out.

“Our personality develops in the course of life from germs that are hard or impossible to discern,” writes Jung “and it is only our deeds that reveal who we are. . . At first we do not know what deeds or misdeeds, what destiny, what good and evil we have in us, and only the autumn can show what the spring has engendered, only in the evening will it be seen what the morning began.” [Carl Jung, The Development of Personality](#)

